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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000491

SIPDIS

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SCA/CEN, SCA/PAB, SCA/INS, SCA/RA, SCA/PPD, DRL  
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN MEDIA SHOWS UNPRECEDENTED WARMTH TO POST IN MARCH

REFTEL: (A) Ashgabat 302, (A) Ashgabat 345, (B) Ashgabat 425

SUMMARY

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¶1. (U) State media coverage of post events in March was generally full and positive, with some key exceptions. Statements by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Steven Mann during his March 3-6 visit received full but inaccurate coverage. Coverage of Peace Corps Day, the signing of an agreement on HIV/AIDS prevention activities between the U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Turkmenistan, a movie festival to commemorate Black History Month, and the third annual Fulbright Conference was generally-to-very positive. The programs of health and political communication specialist Dr. Gregory James Payne and Black History Month Speaker Dr. Elbert Ransom received much-better-than-expected coverage in state media. Meanwhile, state media neglected to cover President George Bush's nomination of George A. Krol as Ambassador-Designate to Turkmenistan and a three-day border security seminar sponsored by the United States Department of Energy. End Summary.

State Media Misconstrues Mann Statement

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¶2. (U) Following his March 5 meeting with President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Mann gave a lobby statement in which he noted he had congratulated the president on "assuming the duty of president." The same day, Watan TV News (state, Turkmen language) reported that Mann congratulated the president with his "election" to the position. The same inaccuracy appeared throughout state print media. State media omitted Mann's meetings with other government officials.

President Values Peace Corps, but State Media Garbles the Facts

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¶3. (U) On March 1, state dailies "Neutral Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 34,701) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 28,091) published on the front page President Berdimuhamedov's congratulatory message to Peace Corps. His message praised Peace Corps for promoting friendly ties between the people of Turkmenistan and the United States. In subsequent days, state weeklies "Ahal Durmushy" (Turkmen, circ. 35,391), "Maru-Shahu Jahan" (Turkmen, circ. 36,252), "Dashoguz" (Turkmen, circ. 27,183) and "Mugallymlar" (Turkmen, circ. 77,901) likewise reprinted the article on the front page. State weeklies "Watan" (Turkmen, circ. 26,091) and "Beyik Turkmenbashi Nesli" (Turkmen, circ. 22,311) reprinted the message elsewhere.

¶4. (U) On March 2, state dailies "Neutral Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 34,701) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 28,901) published an article praising Peace Corps' cooperation with the host government and its contribution to education and healthcare sector development. The article drew heavily from remarks made by Peace Corps Country Director William Myer and the Charge. However, it invented a statement by the Charge that "Turkmenistan is the ideal place for Peace Corps volunteers." "Neutral Turkmenistan's" coverage of the event included a half-page of interviews with and photographs of five Peace Corps volunteers, but omitted one volunteer's comments about the great disparity between the standard of living in the capital versus that in the regions.

#### State Media Praises Cooperation with USAID

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¶5. (U) On March 8, Watan TV News covered the signing by USAID and the Ministry of Health of a Memorandum of Understanding on increasing HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention efforts. Coverage of the historic agreement mentioned bilateral efforts to improve outreach to youth on both "sexual" and moral matters pertaining to HIV/AIDS. The broadcast included most of a statement by USAID Country Representative Ashley Moretz, where he outlined the importance of the agreement. The following day, state dailies "Neutral Turkmenistan" and "Turkmenistan" placed relevant articles on the front page. The coverage quoted the Charge: "Cooperation in healthcare remains one of the strategic directions of long-lasting Turkmenistani-American partnership". The article highlighted USAID's efforts to combat tuberculosis and child diseases and its support for development of family medicine. In subsequent days, weeklies "Watan" (Turkmen, circ. 26,091) and "Turkmen Gundogary" reprinted the same article.

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#### Movie Festival Receives Wide State Media Coverage

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¶6. (U) On March 8, Watan TV News announced the opening of post's film festival in honor of Black History Month (March 8-12). The following day, state dailies "Neutral Turkmenistan" and "Turkmenistan" published a positive article on the occasion and accurately listed names of the movies to be featured during the festival. The article also mentioned the presence of Ransom at the movie screening. State weekly "Edebiyat we Sungat" (Turkmen, circ. 24,111) reprinted the article. Watan TV News aired video of the opening events, interspersed with segments from the documentary "The Legacy of Rosa Parks." On March 15, state weekly "Ashgabat" (Turkmen, circ.16,561) published an article about the festival centered around an interview with Dr. Ransom.

¶7. (U) On March 11, state channel TV-4 dedicated a 20-minute program to the opening of the festival. The program summarized interviews taken with the Charge, Public Affairs Officer, Ransom and Payne. These comments included the Charge's and PAO's comments that Ransom's example demonstrated the ability of people to pursue societal change through development of their own skills and potential. The PAO also expressed hope for expanded exchanges with Turkmenistan. The broadcast also included scenes of protest demonstrations from the Parks documentary.

#### State Media Praises Fulbright Conference and U.S. Exchange Programs

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¶8. (U) On March 10, "Neutral Turkmenistan" and "Turkmenistan" published positive articles on the post-sponsored Fulbright Conference. The article praised the conference as successful, and characterized it as an opportunity for exchanges in such areas as international law, economics, history, geography, and English language studies. It noted the keynote speeches by Ransom and Payne and praised the State Department's Fulbright program for promoting the exchange of ideas and knowledge and for promoting mutual understanding between nations. The conference received similar positive coverage on pro-government website [www.turkmenistan.ru](http://www.turkmenistan.ru) on the same day, and on subsequent days in state weeklies Balkan

(Turkmen, circ. 24,631), "Turkmen Gundogary" and "Watan."

¶9. (U) On March 13 TV-4 (state) dedicated a 20-minute program to the Fulbright Conference. The program again included portions of interviews with the Charge, PAO, Ransom and Payne. The Charge emphasized the need for such conferences to help the people of Turkmenistan exchange ideas and discuss their own development, prosperity and security. Charge outlined the importance of U.S.-sponsored educational exchange programs to improving educational potential and post's intention to expand such programs in the future.

#### Additional Coverage of Ransom and Payne

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¶10. (U) On March 9, "Neutral Turkmenistan" published a positive article about Payne's meeting with state journalists -- including the fact that Payne stressed the importance of media objectivity and accountability. On March 12, the same paper published an article, with photographs, about the Fulbright conference focused on interviews with Ransom and Payne. State weekly "Mugallymlar Gazeti" (Turkmen, circ. 77,901) reprinted the article.

¶11. (U) TV-4 also provided accurate and full coverage of the Payne and Ransom interviews, from the movie festival and Fulbright Conference. Ransom shared his experience and knowledge about the Civil Rights movement and emphasized the desire of Turkmenistan's people to learn new ideas. Payne spoke about importance of public diplomacy, critical thinking and access to reliable independent sources of global news. Both speakers emphasized the importance of further educational reform in Turkmenistan.

#### State Media Omissions in March

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¶12. (U) Major state media outlets ignored post's announcement of the nomination of George Krol as Ambassador Designate to Turkmenistan. Independent website [www.turkmenpress.com](http://www.turkmenpress.com) (Turkmen) posted the embassy's March 27 press release on Krol's nomination.

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¶13. (U) Another item that lost state media attention was a Commodity Identification Seminar conducted by the U.S. Department of Energy from 12-14 March. Despite the presence of representatives from Turkmenistan's State Customs Service, the State Border Service and Ministry of Trade and Consumer Cooperation, no state outlets covered the event.

#### COMMENT

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¶14. (SBU) Post was surprised by the intensive state media coverage of the Payne and Ransom programs and related cultural and educational programming in March, as well as the signing of the bilateral agreement on HIV/AIDS awareness efforts. State media gave much better than expected coverage of controversial issues such as freedom of speech and information and HIV/AIDS. End Comment.

BRUSH